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Parade greets museum wing

Medal of Honor winners are honored guests at opening

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Advocate staff photo by Patrick
Dennis

Veterans wave flags Friday in New Orleans during the National D-Day Museum's Pacific Victory Parade held in conjunction with the opening of the museum's Pacific wing.

NEW ORLEANS — Jefferson Joseph De Blanc of St. Martinville was only 20 years old and had a mere nine hours of training in a fighter plane when he shot down five Japanese aircraft over the Solomon Islands on Jan. 31, 1943.

De Blanc, who parachuted into the ocean from his crippled Wildcat the same day, swam six miles and survived for two weeks on the Japanese-held island of Kolombangara before being rescued by the U.S. Navy.

Three years later, President Harry Truman presented De Blanc the Medal of Honor — America's highest military award.

Of the 463 such medals conferred for actions during World War II, only 60 of those recipients are alive today. The 80-year-old De Blanc is the only living World War II Medal of Honor holder in Louisiana. There are two other Medal of Honor winners from Louisiana, from the Korean and Vietnam wars.

On Friday, the 60th anniversary of Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, De Blanc was among the dozen Medal of Honor holders who rode in a parade through downtown New Orleans to mark the anniversary and the grand opening of the National D-Day Museum's Pacific wing.

At the museum's ribbon-cutting, founder and author Stephen Ambrose was flanked by numerous dignitaries, including former President George Bush, actor Tom Hanks and the Medal of Honor recipients.

Some of the crowd — eight or nine deep on either side of the street — that had assembled for the parade pressed against barricades for a glimpse of Bush, a Navy pilot during World War II.

In his remarks, the former president made reference to both the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the recent terrorist attacks in New York.

"On Sept. 11, our nation suffered another surprise attack. And today, we are in a different war. But I think duty, honor, country still prevails," Bush said in his speech. "They say today 'Remember Pearl Harbor,' but I think, we as a nation, also remember Sept. 11, and we have a good, strong commander in chief."

Ambrose spoke mostly about the lessons of the museum's Pacific wing, particularly the hatred, racism and misunderstanding that defined the Pacific battles.

"World War II in Europe involved more people, but lacked the ferocity and the hatred of the campaign in the Pacific," Ambrose said. "Every time the Japanese and the Americans came together, it can be accurately described among the men who were there as hell."

De Blanc said he was "very honored" to ride in the parade.

"I was very humbled," he said.

"I have the Medal of Honor, but a lot of people died. They did a lot more than I did," De Blanc, who was born in Lockport and raised in Port Barre and St. Martinville, said after riding an Army jeep in the two-mile, two-hour parade.

As the leader of a U.S. Marine Corps Reserve fighting squadron in the Solomon Islands, De Blanc was assigned to protect American dive bombers attacking the Japanese fleet. In a matter of minutes on Jan. 31, 1943, he destroyed four Japanese planes that were trying to interfere. Then he realized he was low on fuel — he had 80 gallons when he needed 140 — and would not make it make to his base if he didn't leave the scene at once.

But De Blanc chose to stay and fight, and just as he destroyed a fifth Japanese plane, his plane — named the "Impatient Virgin" — was severely damaged and set afire, forcing him to climb onto the wing and parachute to safety.

"The guy who shot me down, he saw me bail out. He knew I was alive. I knew they (the Japanese) were looking for me," he said. "But I'm not a pessimist. I knew I could survive. I was raised in the swamps."

De Blanc said his main worry was sharks, something not found in south Louisiana's swamplands.

"The only thing that hit me while I was swimming was a dolphin. When it hit me, I walked on water," he said with a grin.

De Blanc grinned even wider when asked if, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and the resultant U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan, he would like to be a 20-year-old fighter pilot all over again.

"How'd you guess?" he replied. "I'm a born agitator."

Like the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans, De Blanc said the Sept. 11 attacks served to awaken America's patriotism, which he said was fading out.

Fellow World War II veteran Jack Lucas of Hattiesburg, Miss., who rode in Friday's parade and spoke during a panel discussion at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, is the youngest person to receive the Medal of Honor.

Lucas, a private first class at the time, was just five days past his 17th birthday in early 1945 when he crept with his fellow Marines through a trench close to the front lines at Iwo Jima. Suddenly, they were ambushed and attacked. When a grenade landed nearby, he shouted a warning to his comrades and rolled on top of it. When another landed, he reached out and pulled it under him. Only one exploded.

"Thank God. I could only handle one," Lucas said, noting that he only noticed the grenades because his rifle had jammed, causing him to look down. "If it (the explosion) had knocked me out, I would have drowned in my own blood."

Lucas said he is thankful to the United States for awarding him the Medal of Honor.

"But there are a lot of people who did just as much as me and never got a medal," he said. "Here's (the D-Day Museum's Pacific wing and Friday's parade) an opportunity for all of us to receive something."

The museum opened a year and a half ago — also with a large military parade through the city — on the 56th anniversary of the Allied invasion at Normandy on June 6, 1944, or D-Day. The museum's first wing is dedicated to the European Theater of World War II.

The Pacific exhibit features photographs, videos, artifacts, maps, quotes, newspaper headlines, interactive touch-screens and oral histories describing the many amphibious invasions that took place across the Pacific during World War II. The Pearl Harbor attack, the Battle of Midway, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and key amphibious assaults at Iwo Jima and Okinawa are highlighted.

The D-Day Museum was built in the Crescent City because New Orleans shipbuilder Andrew Jackson Higgins designed and built the drop-front landing craft used during the Normandy invasion. A full-size replica of a "Higgins boat" is in the museum, located at the corner of Magazine Street and Andrew Higgins Drive, formerly Howard Avenue.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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